

## Family Structure Variations and Intimate Relationships of the Children Involved

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One hundred sixty-six unmarried college students from continuously intact families, terminated parental cohabiting unions, and divorced homes participated in the current study. Participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and parental divorced homes differed in their experiences with parental absence. Differences were also found across all three groups for dating behaviors and relationship attitudes. Participants from cohabiting unions were the youngest at their first crush, had more dating partners, more cohabiting relationships, more of a desire to end their current relationship, more positive attitudes about cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births, and more negative attitudes regarding marriage than the other two groups. Regression analyses were used to explain the dating behaviors and relationship attitudes of participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes with the model being more predictive of participants from cohabiting unions.

*Keywords:* cohabitation, divorce, intimate relationships, dating behaviors

Family structures in the United States are changing dramatically. In addition to intact family structures (signified by, continuously married parents; Vangelisti, 2004) but now there are also single parent families (i.e., headed by an unmarried or separated mother or father), divorced families (i.e., couples who have obtained a legal dissolution of their marriage; American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000), step-families (i.e., reconstituted families; one biological parent who has remarried to a step-parent and children), and as cohabiting families (i.e., two people living together in a sexual relationship when not legally married; American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). The act of cohabiting has been identified in several different ways in recent literature, ranging from a prelude to marriage, a stage within the marriage process, and an alternative to marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Vangelists, 2004). For the purposes of the current study, cohabitation was defined as two people living together as in a married relationship who conceived children while in the relationship.

Cohabitation itself is becoming more common in American society. During the last thirty years there has been an increase in cohabitation prior to marriage as well as cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (Hansen, Moum, & Shapiro, 2007). According to the Na-

tional Institute of Health (2002), half of women in their thirties in 1995 had lived with an intimate sexual partner at some time outside of marriage. Also, between 1990 and 1994, more than half of all first marriages began with partner cohabitation (National Institute of Health, 2002).

Previous research is limited in terms of the experience of parental cohabitation for children. It has been estimated that children born to cohabiting parents will spend  $\frac{1}{4}$  of their childhood in a single-parent household, another  $\frac{1}{4}$  with parental cohabitation, and about  $\frac{1}{2}$  of their childhood with married parents (National Institute of Health, 2002). It has been suggested that the experience of parental cohabitation can be detrimental for the children involved (Artis, 2007; Brown, 2004). Previous research has found that children from cohabiting families score lower on cognitive tests, exhibit less self control (Artis, 2007), demonstrate more behavioral and emotional problems, and report less school engagement (Brown, 2004) than children from intact families. Little research, however, has examined the consequences of terminated parental cohabiting unions (i.e., cohabiting relationship between biological parents that has dissolved in a similar fashion as obtaining a dissolution of marriage; it is not necessary to go before a court system to dissolve a cohabiting relationship) on the intimate relationships of the children involved.

### Benefit of Two-Parent Families for Children

Previous research has demonstrated that the presence of the biological father in the same household as

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the child is important for children. For instance, according to Lamb (1999), children from two-parent homes have better psychosocial adjustment (e.g., less internalizing and externalizing behaviors), higher educational achievement, less involvement in antisocial and delinquent behavior, and a stronger ability to establish and maintain romantic relationships, when compared to children from single-parent and divorced homes.

While the majority of this research has been conducted by comparing children from married, two-biological parent homes and children from divorced homes, it is unclear if terminated parental cohabitation results in similar consequences. It has been speculated that children born out-of-wedlock do not fare any better (or worse) than children of divorce and that the effects of father absence are similar for both groups of children (Coney & Mackey, 1998; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988). On the other hand, experiencing the divorce of one's parents may be different psychologically than never having had a relationship with a parent (Lamb, 1999).

### **Father Absence and Intimate Relationships**

Father absence can have long-term consequences for the intimate relationships of the children involved when they become adults. Father absence has been linked to early dating (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Jeynes, 2002; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986; Nielsen, 1999; Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Thornton, 1991), early childbearing (Jeynes, 2002; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988), higher rates of cohabiting (Amato, 1988; 1996; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Thornton, 1991), conflicting attitudes about marriage (Amato, 1988; Gabardi & Rosen, 1991, 1992; Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1992), and more favorable attitudes about divorce (Amato, 1988; Amato & Booth, 1991).

It has been suggested that parental divorce and father absence are negatively related to children's courtship activities when they become adults (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Jeynes, 2002; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986; McCabe, 1997; Nielsen, 1999; Schaick & Stolberg, 2001; Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Thornton, 1991). For instance, parental divorce and father absence may be related to the long-lasting problems with sexuality and intimate relationships demonstrated in adults who had this experience (Nielsen, 1999; Schaick & Stolberg, 2001; Sprague &

Kinney, 1997), especially daughters (McCabe, 1997). Research has found that children who grew up in father-absent homes initiate heterosexual dating relationships earlier (Thornton, 1991), become sexually active at an earlier age (Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986), and have more dating partners (Duran-Aydintug, 1997) than children from intact families. Children who have experienced father absence also may have more difficulty trusting their dating partners (Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Schaick & Stolberg, 2001; Sprague & Kinney, 1997) and may be less willing or able to commit to long-term relationships when they become adults (Duran-Aydintug, 1997).

Children who experience father absence are at a higher risk for early childbearing (Jeynes, 2002; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988). Early childbearing may be related to the attitudes regarding sexuality and dating that children with this experience demonstrate as adults (Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986; Nielsen, 1999; Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Thornton, 1991). Jeynes (2002) found that children living in never-married single-parent, cohabiting, and divorced or separated family structures had more positive attitudes about having children out-of-wedlock than did children from intact homes.

An inability to commit fully to long-term relationships (Duran-Aydintug, 1997) may be related to the higher rates of cohabiting by children of divorce (Amato, 1996). Duran-Aydintug (1997) found that participants who chose to cohabit viewed it as a trial marriage. Thornton (1991) believes that early sexual activity among children who experienced father absence results in earlier cohabitation and earlier marriages when they become adults and has suggested that the attitudes and behaviors parents demonstrate are related to more positive attitudes about cohabitation in their children. Amato (1988, 1996) theorizes that children who experience father absence cohabit prior to marriage because they hold less conventional attitudes about marriage.

Research has found that children who experience father absence may hold more negative attitudes for their own future marriage and the institution of marriage when they become adults than participants from intact families (Amato, 1988; Gabardi & Rosen, 1991, 1992; Jennings et al., 1992; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986; Thornton, 1991). According to Amato (1988), children of divorce may value marriage but are conscious of its limitations and are more open-minded regarding its al-

ternatives. Gabardi and Rosen (1992) found that the more time that had passed since the parental divorce, the more negative and impractical the views participants from divorced homes had regarding long-term relationships. Research also suggests that the remarriage of the custodial parent (Thornton, 1991) may be negatively related to the attitudes about marriage participants from divorced homes exhibit.

Children who have experienced father absence also have more approving attitudes about divorce (Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 1991; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986). Kinnaird and Gerrard (1986) found that participants from divorced and reconstituted families held more positive views of divorce than participants from intact families. Individuals from reconstituted families also held more positive views of divorce than participants from divorced homes whose parents did not remarry. This may be because they viewed the remarriage of their custodial parent as a positive outcome to the divorce. When asked, participants from divorced homes were more likely to see divorce as a possible event for themselves than participants from intact homes.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The majority of research that has examined the effects of parental divorce and father absence has demonstrated an intergenerational transmission of relationship instability in that the relationships of the biological parents influence the intimate relationships of their children when they become adults (Amato & Booth, 2001; Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) speculates that children learn behavior by observing the actions of others as well as the consequences associated with those actions. Here, the family unit is viewed as the main source of observational learning, with parents serving as role models (Kohn, 1969; 1983).

The social learning perspective hypothesizes that problematic intimate relationship behaviors are learned (Ellis et al., 2003) and that the parental models of dyadic behaviors children witness influence their future intimate relationships (Amato & Booth, 2001; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Thornton, 1991). According to this perspective, children from divorced homes are exposed to poor parental models which increase the probability that they will not learn how to function successfully in

their future intimate relationships. From this perspective, parental divorce and father absence are associated with increased exposure to maternal dating and repartnering behaviors. These exposures, as a result, support destructive relationship formation behaviors, earlier onset of reproduction (Ellis et al., 2003), and negative attitudes regarding future intimate relationships.

### **Limitations of Previous Research and Purpose of Study**

The majority of research that has examined the consequences of father absence on the dating behaviors and relationship attitudes of adults who experienced this absence as children has focused on father absence as a result of parental divorce (Amato, 1988; 1996; Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Gabardi & Rosen, 1991, 1992; Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1992; Jeynes, 2002; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Nielsen, 1999; Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Thornton, 1991). However, father absence may occur for reasons other than parental divorce, such as terminated cohabiting unions. It has been suggested that children who lack a relationship with their father, regardless of the reason, are at a higher risk for developing less trusting, intimate, and committed romantic relationships in adulthood because parent-child relationships serve as the basis for peer and intimate relationships in adulthood (i.e., social learning theory; Schaick & Stolberg, 2001). If there is not a parent-child relationship or if there is an unstable parent-child relationship, it is logical that children would have more difficulty forming stable intimate relationships as adults.

To address some of the limitations of previous research, the current study examined the relation between parental absence as a result of terminated parental cohabitation and parental divorce and the dating behaviors and relationship attitudes of participants from these family structures. Parental absence was also examined more extensively using linear regression to determine how the following variables combine to best predict the dating behaviors and relationship attitudes of participants: gender of child, racial identification, length of father absence, and amount of father involvement. The following dating behaviors were examined: age at first crush, number of dating partners, number of cohabiting relationships, current relationship satisfaction, and

desire to end current relationship. Attitudes regarding out-of-wedlock births, cohabitation, marriage, and divorce were also examined.

Data analyzed in the current study were derived from an online survey administered at a southeastern public research university with a highly diverse student population. Participants included 166 unmarried college students from intact, terminated parental cohabiting unions, and divorced homes. Participants who experienced parental absence due to parental separation/divorce had varying experiences of parental absence, in terms of length of absence, age at absence, and reasons for absence (parental cohabitation, separation/divorce, out of wedlock birth). Missing data were handled by using the Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) method to estimate values for the missing cases. The estimated values were then substituted for the missing cases, a process referred to as imputation, using the computer program Amelia (King, Honaker, Joseph, & Scheve, 2001). The new data set was used in analyses. The following research questions were tested: Are there significant differences in the experience of parental absence in participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes?; Are there significant differences in participants from intact, terminated parental cohabiting unions, and divorced homes in terms of dating behaviors and relationship attitudes?; How do various experiences of parental absence, including reason for absence (parental cohabitation, parental divorce), length of absence, and amount of father involvement affect dating behaviors and relationship attitudes?

## Method

### Participants

One hundred sixty-six unmarried college students from married two-biological parent families ( $n = 55$ ), terminated parental cohabiting unions ( $n = 56$ ), and divorced family structures ( $n = 55$ ) participated in the current study. The majority of participants (79%,  $n = 131$ ) were between the ages of 18 and 21. Participants were racially and ethnically diverse, coming from Anglo-European Caucasian ( $n = 31$ ), African-American ( $n = 60$ ), and Latino backgrounds ( $n = 69$ ). Another six (3.6%) participants identified themselves as other. Sixty-one percent of participants ( $n = 102$ ) were female and 39% ( $n = 64$ ) were male.

### Measures

**Demographic questionnaire.** Participants were asked six questions that assessed their age, ethnic origin, sex, current relationship status, and biological parents' relationship status.

**Dating behavior questionnaire.** Participants answered five questions that assessed their age at first crush, number of dating partners, number of cohabiting relationships, current relationship satisfaction, and desire to end current relationship.

**Relationship Attitudes questionnaire.** Twenty-five questions were answered that assessed participants attitudes regarding out-of-wedlock births, cohabitation (Burns & Dunlop, 1998; Duran-Aydintug, 1998), marriage (Burns & Dunlop, 1998), and divorce (Amato, 1996).

**Family Structure Questionnaire.** Ten questions were used to assess participants' family structure while growing up. Questions assessed parents' relationship status while growing up, reason for parental absence, age at parental separation/divorce, length of father absence, amount of father involvement after parental separation, remarriage of custodial parent, and additional cohabiting relationships of custodial parent.

### Procedure

All participants were recruited through introduction to psychology courses at a southeastern public research university and received research credit for participation. All participants read an informed consent letter and completed the informed consent form prior to completing the 30-minute online questionnaire. Participants were first asked general demographic questions followed by sets of questions regarding their dating history, relationship attitudes, and family structure while growing up.

## Results

### Group Comparisons

The samples were relatively similar across age, race, and gender distributions. However, significant differences existed for household income; subjects who came from parental cohabiting unions had the lowest family income followed by participants who came from divorced families and participants from continuously intact homes, respectively. Table 1 shows demographic characteristics by group.

FAMILY VARIATIONS AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Table 1. Demographic characteristics by group

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Male (%)</i>	<i>Income</i>	<i>F Ratio</i>
<i>Age</i>						2.22
<b>Intact</b>	55	1.87	.96			
<b>Cohabitation</b>	56	2.05	1.12			
<b>Divorce</b>	55	1.71	.92			
<i>Race</i>						1.41
<b>Intact</b>	55	2.22	.99			
<b>Cohabitation</b>	56	1.84	.87			
<b>Divorce</b>	55	2.33	.94			
<i>Sex (Male referent group)</i>						2.10
<b>Intact</b>	55			47.3		
<b>Cohabitation</b>	56			41.1		
<b>Divorce</b>	55			27.3		
<i>Income</i>						9.06*
<b>Intact</b>	55				40,000*	
<b>Cohabitation</b>	56				25,000	
<b>Divorce</b>	55				35,000	

\* $p < .001$

Participants from parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes differed with their experience with father absence. Participants who experienced parental cohabiting unions that later separated reported parental separation at a younger age and less father involvement than participants from divorced homes. Participants from parental cohabiting unions also reported more cohabiting unions of their custodial parent than participants who experienced parental divorce. There were no significant differences found for length of father absence and remarriage of the custodial parent. Table 2 gives the experience of father absence from participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes.

**Dating Behaviors and Relationship Attitudes**

The three family structures were compared on dating behaviors (age at first crush, number of dating partners, number of cohabiting relationships, current relationship satisfaction, desire to end current relationship) and relationship attitudes (out-of-wedlock births, cohabitation, marriage, divorce). There were significant mean differences across the three groups for number of dating partners, number of cohabiting relationships,

and desire to end one’s current relationship. Results for age at first crush were marginal. There were no significant differences for current relationship satisfaction. Post hoc analysis indicated significant mean differences between groups. Participants from parental cohabiting unions and divorced families reported having their first crush at an earlier age,  $F(2, 163) = 2.82, p = .06$ ; more dating partners,  $F(2, 163) = 3.94, p < .05$ ; and more of a desire to end their current relationship,  $F(2, 35) = 3.78, p < .05$  than participants from continuously intact homes. Participants from parental cohabiting unions reported more cohabiting relationships,  $F(2, 158) = 3.01, p < .05$  than participants from divorced and continuously intact family structures. MANOVA results for dating behaviors can be found in Table 3.

There were significant mean differences across participants from continuously intact homes, parental cohabiting unions, and divorced homes for attitudes regarding cohabitation and attitudes toward marriage. Results were marginal for attitudes regarding out-of-wedlock births. There were no significant differences for attitudes toward divorce. Post hoc analysis indicated significant mean differences between groups. Participants from continuously intact family structures

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Table 2. *Experience with Father Absence*

	<i>F Ratio</i>	<b>Cohabitation</b>		<b>Divorce</b>	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Age at separation**</b>	6.89	1.30	.57	1.72	1.17
<b>Length of absence</b>	2.37	3.21	1.85	2.80	1.86
<b>Dad involvement*</b>	3.96	18.57	9.41	21.50	10.34
<b>Parent Remarriage</b>	.33	1.95	1.61	1.83	1.37
<b>Parent Cohabitation#</b>	3.26	1.96	1.33	1.65	1.18

\*p<.05

\*\*p<.01

#p=.07

Table 3. *MANOVA results for Dating Behaviors*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F Ratio</i>
<b>Age at crush</b>	Intact	55	1.87	.75	2.82#
	Cohabitation	56	1.57	.85	
	Divorce	55	1.58	.67	
<b>Dating Partners</b>	Intact	55	2.65 <sup>a</sup>	1.02	3.80*
	Cohabitation	56	3.21	1.22	
	Divorce	55	3.15	1.18	
<b>Cohabiting Relationships</b>	Intact	55	1.33	.84	3.10*
	Cohabitation	56	1.62	.93	
	Divorce	55	1.27	.62	
<b>Relationship Satisfaction</b>	Intact	33	4.27	1.26	1.39
	Cohabitation	28	3.89	1.29	
	Divorce	36	4.28	1.19	
<b>Desire to End Relationship</b>	Intact	33	2.24	1.15	3.78*
	Cohabitation	28	3.32 <sup>a</sup>	1.19	
	Divorce	36	2.42	1.46	

\*Refers to Tukey group differences

\*p<.05

#p=.06

reported the least favorable attitudes toward cohabitation,  $F(2, 163) = 3.17, p < .05$ , the most favorable attitudes toward marriage,  $F(2, 163) = 4.83, p < .01$ , and the least favorable attitudes regarding out-of-wedlock births,  $F(2, 163) = 2.86, p = .06$  when compared to participants from parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes. Results for MANOVA for relationship attitudes can be found in 4.

### Regression Analyses

After determining that there were differences for dating behaviors and relationship attitudes, the current study examined the parental cohabitation group and parental divorced group independently. Regression analyses were run with each group with gender, racial identification, length of father absence, and amount of father involvement as the predictors. Models were run for age at first crush, number of dating partners, number of cohabiting relationships, desire to end one's current relationship, attitudes regarding cohabitation, attitudes about out-of-wedlock births, and attitudes toward marriage. Models were not tested for current relationship satisfaction and attitudes toward divorce as there were no mean differences for these variables across the family structure groups.

The model was more predictive of dating behaviors and relationship attitudes for participants from parental cohabiting unions than participants from divorced homes. For participants from cohabiting unions, gender was predictive of number of cohabiting relationships; racial identification was predictive of age at first crush and attitudes toward cohabitation; length of father absence was predictive of age at first crush and attitudes regarding cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births; and amount of father involvement was predictive of number of dating partners and attitudes regarding cohabitation and marriage. For participants from divorced homes the only predictor variable that was found to be significant was racial identification. Here, racial identification was predictive of attitudes regarding cohabitation. None of the other predictor variables were significant for any of the outcome variables for participants from divorced homes. Tables 5 and 6 provide results from regression analyses for dating behaviors and relationship attitudes.

### Discussion

The present study demonstrates the differences between terminated parental cohabiting unions and parental divorce and the impact of these circumstances on dating behaviors and relationship attitudes of participants from these family structures. While numerous studies have examined the negative consequences of father absence on the intimate relationships of adults who have had this experience (Amato, 1988; 1996; Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Gabardi & Rosen, 1991, 1992; Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1992; Jeynes, 2002; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Nielsen, 1999; Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Thornton, 1991), few studies have separated the causes of parental cohabitation and divorce. The majority of studies that examine parental cohabitation group this experience with that of parental divorce, not recognizing that the experiences from these two family structures show important differences.

It is possible for children to experience father absence for reasons other than parental divorce or to experience parental divorce without experiencing father absence. While it has previously been speculated that children born out-of-wedlock do not fare any differently than children of divorce and that the effects of father absence are similar for both groups of children (Coney & Mackey, 1998; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988), the current study demonstrates that this assumption is incorrect.

### Demographics and Experience with Parental Absence

In the current study participants from continuously intact, terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced families were similar across demographics. There were, however, some discrepancies with household income with participants from parental cohabiting unions reporting the lowest income. This was not surprising considering that Manning and Brown (2006) estimated that two-fifths of children in cohabiting households live in poverty. This reduction in family income may explain why these parents chose cohabitation rather than marriage.

Differences were found between participants from divorced homes and terminated parental cohabiting unions in their experience with father absence. While both groups experienced father absence at some point,

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Table 4. MANOVA results for Relationship Attitudes

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F Ratio</i>
<b><i>Cohabitation</i></b>	Intact	55	29.71 <sup>a</sup>	7.16	3.17*
	Cohabitation	56	33.16	7.31	
	Divorce	55	32.24	7.89	
<b><i>Out-of-wedlock Births</i></b>	Intact	55	24.82 <sup>a</sup>	4.66	2.86#
	Cohabitation	56	26.82	4.79	
	Divorce	55	26.00	3.76	
<b><i>Marriage</i></b>	Intact	55	21.24 <sup>a</sup>	4.38	4.83*
	Cohabitation	56	18.79	3.94	
	Divorce	55	19.58	4.37	
<b><i>Divorce</i></b>	Intact	55	7.45	1.72	.19
	Cohabitation	56	7.61	1.58	
	Divorce	55	7.44	1.55	

\*Refers to Tukey group differences

\*p<.05

#p=.06

Table 5. Regression Beta Weights for Cohabiting and Divorced Family Structures

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>Crush</i>		<i>Dating Partners</i>		<i>Cohabiting Relationships</i>		<i>End Relationship</i>		<i>Cohabiting Attitudes</i>		<i>Out-of-wedlock birth Attitudes</i>		<i>Marriage Attitudes</i>	
	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D
<b>Gender</b>	.01	-.14	-.17	.06	-.28*	.08	.32	.28	-.14	-.10	.16	.07	-.03	-.03
<b>Race</b>	-.30*	.13	-.06	-.09	-.06	-.05	-.12	-.02	-.29*	-.27*	.01	.07	-.07	.06
<b>Length of Absence</b>	-.36*	.05	-.09	-.00	-.15	-.11	-.24	-.28	.35 <sup>a</sup>	.11	.53**	.12	-.25	-.11
<b>Dad Involvement</b>	-.26	.07	-.35 <sup>a</sup>	-.16	-.32	-.12	-.43	-.01	.24	-.11	.34 <sup>b</sup>	.02	-.36 <sup>a</sup>	-.11
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.17	.04	.11	.04	.12	.03	.18	.11	.15	.09	.16	.03	.07	.02
<b>F</b>	2.55*	.57	1.56	.48	1.81	.35	1.23	1.00	2.24 <sup>b</sup>	1.32	2.50*	.37	.91	.26

Note. C: cohabiting unions.

Note. D: divorced homes.

\*p<.05

\*p=.06

## FAMILY VARIATIONS AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Table 6. *Regression Results for Relationship Attitudes*

Predictor	Cohabiting attitudes		Out-of-wedlock birth attitudes		Marriage attitudes	
	C	D	C	D	C	D
Gender	-.14	-.10	.16	.07	-.03	-.03
Race	-.29*	-.27*	.01	.07	-.07	.06
Length of absence	.35 <sup>a</sup>	.11	.53**	.12	-.25	-.11
Dad involvement	.24	-.11	.34 <sup>b</sup>	.02	-.36 <sup>a</sup>	-.11
R <sup>2</sup>	.15	.09	.16	.03	.07	.02
F	2.24 <sup>b</sup>	1.32	2.50*	.37	.91	.26

Note. C: cohabiting unions.

Note. D: divorced homes.

\* $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

<sup>a</sup> $p = .06$

<sup>b</sup> $p = .07$

participants whose parents cohabited reported parental separation at a much younger age (< 6 years) than participants whose parents divorced (6 to 10 years). Couples who divorced may have separated later than couples who cohabited due to the financial costs of obtaining a divorce. It has been estimated that the average cost of divorce in the United States is \$20,000 (McDonald, 2001). It is much easier financially for couples who cohabit to separate than it is for couples who are married to go through the legal process of attaining a divorce.

Participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions reported less father involvement while growing up than participants from divorced homes. Some research has suggested that children of divorce experience a steady decline in contact with their fathers over time (Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Fox & Blanton, 1995; Lamb, 1999; Schaick & Stolberg, 2001; Williamson, 2004). This decline in father-child contact appears to be heightened in terminated parental cohabiting unions. This is only speculation as little is known about the attempts that biological fathers make to have contact with their children who are born out-of-wedlock (Fox &

Blanton, 1995). Terminated parental cohabiting unions may have similar explanations as divorce for reduced father involvement (e.g., parental animosity, length of parents' relationship, custody arrangements, economic factors; see Fox & Blanton, 1995; Nielsen, 1999) or they may have unique reasons for the occurrence. For instance, previous research has suggested that individuals who cohabit lack the ability to commit to long-term relationships (Duran-Aydintug, 1997). This lack of commitment may explain why cohabiting unions dissolve earlier than married unions and may also carry over to the father-child relationship. If fathers are less committed to their children, reduced father involvement would be expected.

Participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions also reported more cohabiting unions by their custodial parent than participants from divorced homes. This may be because the parent found cohabitation to be a suitable alternative to marriage (Amato, 1988). It is interesting to note that despite the differences between the two family structures, there were no significant differences for length of father absence and remarriage of the custodial parent. It is important

to distinguish between terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced families because the two are not the same and the experience of father absence is not the same for both groups of children. This is inconsistent with postulations of previous research (Coney & Mackey, 1998; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988) claiming that the experience of father absence is the same, regardless of the cause of the separation.

### **Dating Behaviors and Relationship Attitudes**

The current study was particularly interested in how terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes compared on their influence on intimate relationships of participants. Results confirmed that while participants from father absent homes (e.g., cohabitation, divorced) differed from intact families in their dating behaviors and relationship attitudes, the cause of father absence yielded significant findings. Participants from intact homes reported their first crush at a later age, fewer dating partners, less favorable attitudes regarding cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, and more favorable attitudes about marriage than participants from both terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes. This was not surprising considering that the literature on intact families is favorable regarding its impact on intimate relationships of the children involved (Amato, 1988; 1996; Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Gabardi & Rosen, 1991, 1992; Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1992; Jeynes, 2002; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Nielsen, 1999; Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Thornton, 1991).

In the current study participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes were similar on their age at first crush, number of dating partners, attitudes toward cohabitation, attitudes toward out-of-wedlock births, and attitudes toward marriage. This finding was not startling as previous research has combined terminated parental cohabiting unions with parental divorce when examining the effects of father absence. Findings from the current study expand previous research in that it specifically examined the differences between these two forms of parental separation.

Participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes had more positive attitudes toward cohabitation than participants from intact homes, with participants from cohabiting unions having more favorable attitudes and experience with cohabita-

tion in their intimate relationships. This supports social learning theory as they are repeating the relationship formation methods they witnessed as children (Shaick & Stolberg, 2001). Participants from divorced homes reported more favorable attitudes toward cohabitation than participants from intact homes; however, participants from intact homes reported having more cohabiting relationships, indicating that behaviors people exhibit do not necessarily reflect their attitudes. Surprisingly the number of reported cohabiting relationships of participants from intact families was similar to subjects from divorced homes, with participants from intact homes reporting slightly more cohabiting relationships. This conflicts with previous research that found participants from divorced homes engaged in more cohabitation than participants from intact homes (Amato, 1988; 1996, Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Thornton, 1991).

Results from the current study suggest that the view of cohabitation may be moving away from disapproval to more of an alternative to marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). If the overall view of cohabitation is changing, it is possible that participants who experienced continuously intact homes as children would be more likely to form their intimate relationships through cohabitation than participants from divorced homes and that participants from divorced homes would choose not to cohabit as they have reservations regarding making long-term commitments in any manner (Duran-Aydintug, 1997).

Participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions also reported more of a desire to end their current relationship than participants from intact and divorced homes. This may also be because they lack long-term commitment (Duran-Aydintug, 1997). They may lack commitment because of the parental relationship they witnessed as children (Amato & Booth, 1991; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Thornton, 1991) or the repartnering behaviors of their parents following termination of parental cohabitation (Ellis et al., 2003).

### **Predicting Intimate Relationship Behaviors and Attitudes**

The current study attempted to determine why participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes differed in their dating behaviors and relationship attitudes. The goal was to find out what it was about the parental separation that differed and how those differences impacted the intimate rela-

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tionships of participants. The predictors chosen (i.e., gender, racial identification, length of father absence, amount of father involvement) applied more to participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions than participants from divorced homes. This is interesting considering the predictors were selected based on research that examined the consequences of parental divorce (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Lamb, 1999; McCabe, 1997).

In the current study, gender was predictive of number of cohabiting relationships for participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions but not participants from divorce, with males reporting more cohabiting relationships than females. Previous research, however, found higher rates of cohabitation among daughters who experienced father absence (Grainger, 2003; Thornton, 2001) due to parental divorce. The current study recognizes that father absence can be caused by reasons other than parental divorce by examining parental cohabiting unions that had separated. Findings of the current study suggest that males from terminated parental cohabiting unions and females from divorced homes are more likely to cohabit than males and females from other family structures.

Race was a predictor of age at first crush for participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and attitudes toward cohabitation for both father-absent groups (i.e., cohabitation, divorce). Hispanic participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions reported having their first crush earlier (< 10 years of age) followed by Caucasians (age 11) and African-Americans (age 12). African Americans from terminated parental cohabiting unions reported the most favorable attitudes toward cohabitation followed by Caucasians then Hispanics. For participants whose parents' divorced, however, African-Americans reported the most favorable attitudes toward cohabitation followed by Hispanics then Caucasians. It is unknown why racial discrepancies existed for these outcomes. It may be that other factors associated with race may be more influential, such as socioeconomic status and neighborhood context. Future research needs to examine these differences in more detail.

The length of father absence was a significant predictor of age at first crush, attitudes regarding cohabitation, and attitudes about out-of-wedlock births for participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions but not participants from divorced homes. Participants

who experienced father absence for 6 months or longer reported having their first crush at an earlier age, more favorable attitudes toward cohabitation, and more favorable attitudes regarding out-of-wedlock births than participants who did not experience prolonged father absence (e.g., less than 6 months).

Findings from the current study differ from previous research, which had conflicting results with some reporting that parental separation in early childhood (< 5 years old) is more problematic (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Quinlan, 2003) and others claiming separation during adolescence is more disruptive for intimate relationships (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). Sprague and Kinney (1997) suggested that if parental separation occurs during adolescence, the experience of parental divorce may diminish the child's ability to trust and act altruistically, causing problems in their intimate relationships. The current study examined parental cohabitation as a cause of father absence instead of being limited to parental divorce. Also, while previous research considered prolonged father absence to result from parental divorce before the child was 5 years of age, the current study defined prolonged father absence as separation between father and child for more than a six month period occurring any time between birth and age 18. The divergence in defining length of father absence can best explain the discrepancy in results from previous research and the current study.

The amount of father involvement while growing up was a predictor for participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions but not participants from divorced homes. Amount of father involvement was a significant predictor for number of dating partners, attitudes regarding out-of-wedlock births, and attitudes toward marriage. Participants who reported more father involvement had fewer dating partners and less favorable attitudes regarding out-of-wedlock births; participants who reported less father involvement reported slightly more favorable attitudes regarding marriage.

Previous research has suggested that children who maintain a relationship with their father have a stronger ability to establish and maintain romantic relationships as adults (Lamb, 1999) than children who do not. Findings from the current study suggest that father involvement is vital for children from terminated parental cohabiting unions as well. It is interesting to note that participants who experienced minimal father involve-

ment demonstrated more favorable attitudes toward marriage. It is uncertain why there is a discrepancy for attitudes toward marriage for participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions.

### Limitations of the Current Study

The sample used in this study was a college population and is not necessarily representative of adults who have experienced father absence. Existing research has shown that children from single-parent, father-absent homes are less likely to attend college because of fewer resources available to them (McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). Also, the survey for the current study was administered online. This may have interfered with how participants responded to questions. They may not have been completely honest in their responses.

### Implications for Future Research

The current study provided evidence that the cause for father absence influences the future intimate relationships of children who grow up with this experience. However, the parental cohabiting family unit needs to be examined more thoroughly. While parental cohabiting unions may terminate resulting in a situation similar to parental divorce, it is also possible for parental cohabiting unions to remain together, forming a relationship similar to a continuously intact family. Further research needs to address this issue.

Additionally, while the present study examined terminated parental cohabiting unions in terms of its impact on dating behaviors and relationship attitudes of the children who grew up with this experience, questions remain unanswered regarding the reduction in father involvement post parental relationship dissolution; connection between reduced father involvement and attitudes toward marriage; reduction in current relationship satisfaction; influence of terminated parental cohabiting unions on current relationship satisfaction of adults with this experience; and gender and racial divergences regarding dating behaviors and relationship attitudes between participants from terminated parental cohabiting unions and divorced homes. The current study did not perform post hoc analyses on these outcomes and suggests that further research needs to be conducted.

Future research also needs to examine how factors related to father absence predict characteristics of the intimate relationships of adults who experienced fa-

ther absence as children more extensively. Previous research has linked father absence to earlier dating, earlier sexual activity, higher rates of cohabiting, and a greater likelihood of divorce (Amato, 1988, 1996; Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Jeynes, 2002; Kinnaird & Gerard, 1986; Nielsen, 1999; Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Thornton, 1991); however, how factors related to father absence mediate these relationship behaviors remains unclear. Because the regression models selected for the current study included noncontributing factors for the cohabiting and divorced groups, the power of the statistical test was reduced along with its predictive qualities. Results from the current study shed some light on how the experience of terminated parental cohabitation can impact the intimate relationships of participants, but did little to explain the experience of parental divorce.

The length of father absence should be redefined in future research and should no longer use parental divorce and the timing of parental separation as the defining factor. The current study used a time period of six months to implicate prolonged father absence to take into account the possibility of temporary father absence. This study has demonstrated that father absence can occur for reasons other than divorce and that the experience of father absence differs based on the reason for absence. Future research needs to recognize that father absence can occur for reasons other than parental divorce and parental divorce can occur without prolonged father absence.

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